

University of Groningen

Forgotten Bibles: Friedrich Max Müller's Edition of the Sacred Books of the East

Molendijk, Arie

Published in:
Publications of the English Goethe Society

DOI:
[10.1080/09593683.2016.1224507](https://doi.org/10.1080/09593683.2016.1224507)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Molendijk, A. (2016). Forgotten Bibles: Friedrich Max Müller's Edition of the Sacred Books of the East. *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 85(2-3), 159-169.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09593683.2016.1224507>

Copyright

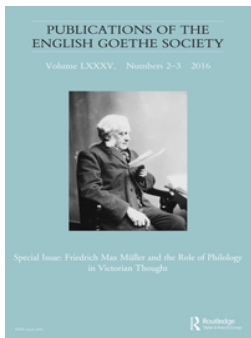
Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.



Forgotten Bibles: Friedrich Max Müller's Edition of the Sacred Books of the East

Arie L. Molendijk

To cite this article: Arie L. Molendijk (2016) Forgotten Bibles: Friedrich Max Müller's Edition of the Sacred Books of the East, *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 85:2-3, 159-169, DOI: [10.1080/09593683.2016.1224507](https://doi.org/10.1080/09593683.2016.1224507)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09593683.2016.1224507>



© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 19 Oct 2016.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 54



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Forgotten Bibles: Friedrich Max Müller's Edition of the *Sacred Books of the East*

ARIE L. MOLENDIJK

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Max Müller's edition of the *Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910) is doubtless one of the most ambitious and daring editorial projects of late Victorian scholarship. This essay examines the claim that these translations ratified a whole taxonomy of concepts and procedures that would characterize the academic study of religion well into the twentieth century. I argue that it is more appropriate to see the edition as a monument of the emerging comparative study of the religious Orient. The series textualized and religionized (if this word is permitted) the East. The edition also promoted the idea that religious oriental texts function as scriptures in ways analogous to the Hebrew and Christian Bible. This type of orientalism was no one-way street, but the conditions of the conversation were determined by the discursivity of a textualized understanding of religion.

KEYWORDS Friedrich Max Müller, *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910), 'big science', textualization of religion, method of comparison

Introduction

The Sacred Books of the East (1879–1910, hereafter SBE), an edition consisting of fifty volumes, is one of the most ambitious and daring editorial projects of late Victorian scholarship. The German-born philologist, orientalist and religious scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) persuaded Oxford University Press to publish the books. 'Müller's grand design'¹ was supported financially by both Oxford University Press and the India Office of the British Empire. Müller resigned from his Oxford chair of comparative philology to become the general editor of this mega-project. He engaged an international team of renowned scholars that included James Legge, James Darmesteter, Hendrik Kern, Julius Eggeling, T.W. Rhys Davids, Kashinath Trimbak Telang and Hermann Oldenberg in order to translate the 'sacred texts'.

The edition of the *Sacred Books of the East* teaches us, according to its *auctor intellectualis* Friedrich Max Müller, at least one lesson: that 'we are not the only people who have a Bible'. These scholarly translations would contribute to the historical study of oriental

¹ Peter Sutcliffe, *Oxford University Press: An Informal History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 45.

religions, which in turn ‘may have its very important bearing on the questions nearest to our own hearts’.² Notwithstanding the somewhat cautious formulation, actually Müller did not entertain any doubt that the serious study of the Orient would be beneficial in intellectual and religious respects. Not only in the West, but also in India the editorial work of Max Müller was much appreciated.

Max Müller maintained that the edition of the *Sacred Books of the East* provided the ‘facts’ for the comparative study of religion.³ Contemporary reviewers thought along the same lines.⁴ These claims seem rather modest, especially when compared with how recent historians of religious and oriental studies see the significance of the series. According to Norman Girardot, for instance, the translations ‘ratify a whole taken-for-granted taxonomy of concepts, categories, and procedures that will characterize the academic study of religion well into the twentieth century’.⁵ Tomoko Masuzawa surmised that the series ‘played not an insignificant role in the development of the world religions discourse in the twentieth century, and perhaps even in its persistence’.⁶ Meanwhile, it is assumed that similar extended editorial projects had a significant impact. Bernard’s and Picart’s seven splendidly illustrated folio volumes of the *Religious Ceremonies of the World* (1723–1737), which appeared in the first half of the eighteenth century, allegedly helped create the field of the comparative history of religion.⁷ Other historians, however, tell us that the comparative approach gained prominence only in the nineteenth century. How are such claims to be weighed and substantiated? In this paper I will explore these questions by careful contextualization. To which other grand projects may we compare Müller’s edition? What intellectual impact did the series have in the history of religious studies? Was a new form of discursivity implied in the edition? Did it indeed change the game of the discipline?

Big science and grand projects

Grand editorial projects such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Migne edition of the church fathers, the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, and the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (under supervision of the famous Old Testament scholar

² Max Müller, ‘Forgotten Bibles’, *Nineteenth Century*, 15 (1884), 1004–22, (1021); reprinted in *Last Essays. Second Series: Essays on the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1901), pp. 1–35. This paper draws on Chapter 6 of Arie L. Molendijk, *Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Quoted with permission of Oxford University Press.

³ Müller, *Theosophy or Psychological Religion*, Gifford Lectures, Glasgow 1892 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1893), esp. pp. vi and 542.

⁴ Archibald H. Sayce, review of the first three volumes of the SBE, *Nature*, 21 (1879), 77–78, (77): ‘It is intended that the scientific student of religion should possess in them [SBE] trustworthy materials on which to found his generalisations and build his conclusions’; cf. [T.W. Rhys Davids ?], ‘Sacred Books of the East. Translated by Various Oriental scholars, and edited by F. Max Müller’, *Quarterly Review*, 163 (1886), 180–203, (203): ‘the very greatest possible aid to the comparative study of the history of ideas, especially of religious ideas’.

⁵ Norman Girardot, ‘Max Müller’s *Sacred Books* and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions’, *Religions*, 41/3 (2002), 213–50, p. 220; cf. p. 219.

⁶ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 265.

⁷ Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe: Picart & Bernard’s ‘Religious Ceremonies of the World’* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010), p. 19. Jean Frederic Bernard and Bernard Picart, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du Monde*, 1723–43.

William Robertson Smith), are important subjects of study. They signalled the emergence of large-scale scholarship in the humanities as well as the importance of entrepreneurship and the stamina of individual leaders, who initiated and conducted these cooperative ventures with great personal effort and dedication. Not all editors had the commercial genius of the abbé Jacques Paul Migne, who published according to his biographer a book every ten days for thirty years,⁸ but in all cases a solid financial basis was crucial for success. As with big industries, big science (*Großwissenschaft*) needs working capital, to quote the German historian and Nobel Prize winner Theodor Mommsen, on the occasion of the inauguration of Adolf Harnack to the Berlin Academy of Sciences in 1890.⁹

The church historian Harnack (1850–1931) was one of the most successful organizers in the history of modern scholarship. He was not only director of the Royal Library in Berlin, but also of the *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft*, which was founded in 1911 to further the sciences (including the humanities).¹⁰ This society initiated large-scale projects and research institutes, from which the famous Max Planck Institutes emerged. The natural sciences were predominant in this organization, but the idea of large scholarly enterprises actually began with the great textual editions in the humanities, especially in classical studies (*Altertumswissenschaften*) in the late nineteenth century.¹¹ Research on the history of such ventures concentrates on the development of the institutions, the research programmes and projects, and the young scholars who did the work—most of the time for relatively small pay. Characteristics of what is nowadays termed ‘big science’, such as team work, a steady flow of publications and editions, specialized techniques and international cooperation, can already be discerned in these early stages.

In his memorandum on the foundation of research institutes, which Harnack sent to the German emperor Wilhelm II in October 1909, he pointed in particular to the large instruments and machines that are needed in the hard sciences, but cooperation and division of labour are also necessary to promote the advancement of scholarship.¹² To study the universe and the microcosms, he argued, we need the ‘large enterprise of the sciences’ (*Großbetrieb der Wissenschaften*).¹³ In his memorandum Harnack also noted that the scale on which the humanities work is much enlarged by huge editorial projects such as the edition of the Greek church fathers. Notwithstanding its dangers, such as the mechanization of the work of scientists, the overrating of data collection and the

⁸ R. Howard Bloch, *God's Plagiarist: Being an Account of the Fabulous Industry and Irregular Commerce of the Abbé Migne* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 1.

⁹ Adolf von Harnack, ‘Antrittsrede in der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften’ (1890), in Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack als Zeitgenosse*, ed. by Kurt Nowak, 2 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), I, pp. 976–82, (p. 982).

¹⁰ The German term ‘Wissenschaft’ (literally translated as ‘science’) comprises both the (hard) sciences as well as the humanities.

¹¹ Rüdiger vom Bruch, ‘Mommsen und Harnack. Die Geburt von Big Science aus den Geisteswissenschaften’, in *Theodor Mommsen: Wissenschaft und Politik im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Alexander Demandt, Andreas Goltz and Heinrich Schlange-Schöningen (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 121–41; Stefan Rebenich, ‘Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Großwissenschaft. Altertumswissenschaftliche Unternehmungen an der Berliner Akademie und Universität im 19. Jahrhundert’, in *Die modernen Väter der Antike: Die Entwicklung der Altertumswissenschaften an Akademie und Universität im Berlin des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Annette M. Baertschi and Colin G. King (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 397–421.

¹² Harnack, ‘Zur Kaiserlichen Botschaft vom 11. Oktober 1910: Begründung von Forschungsinstituten’ (1909/1910/1911), in *Adolf von Harnack als Zeitgenosse*, II, pp. 1025–49.

¹³ Harnack, ‘Vom Großbetrieb der Wissenschaft’ (1905), in *Adolf von Harnack als Zeitgenosse*, II, pp. 1009–19.

undervaluation of intellectual understanding, the advancement of big science was a beneficial development in his view. Without telescopes, large-scale expeditions and editions, to name just a few examples, modern science and scholarship was unthinkable. The international character of research as well as education was stressed by Harnack. He was proud of the fact that in 1905 the Berlin University counted more than 1000 students from abroad (from a total number of 7700), and he welcomed the international exchange of students and scholars.¹⁴

The *Sacred Books of the East*: a specimen of big science?

Harnack is one of the few contemporary authors who reflected on the emergence of big science.¹⁵ Although Max Müller explained in his introduction to the series the idea behind the edition of the *Sacred Books of the East*, he did not address the structural changes involved that had taken place in its method of production. His edition of the Rg Veda still was basically the project of one man (although he got help from younger Sanskritists), whereas the series of the *Sacred Books of the East* involved a team of professional scholars. Given the scope of texts and languages, even Müller could not have done this work alone. For the Chinese texts, for instance, he had to rely on his Oxford colleague James Legge. In contrast to the great editorial projects of the Berlin Academy, which were primarily financed by the Prussian state, the edition of the *Sacred Books of the East* was partly funded by the private money of Oxford University Press. The other donor was the India Office of the British Empire, which contributed substantially to the edition.

Yet people were not employed in the strict sense of the word in this huge project. The (often distinguished) scholars were paid a small amount per page, which bore no relation to their time-consuming work. Only Müller as editor-in-chief received a substantial emolument from the press. The series remained a source of income for Oxford University Press for many years to come. Scholars from different nations were recruited by Müller, and in this respect the series reflected the on-going internationalization of oriental scholarship. For Harnack this was an important aspect of the process of scientific change, but international cooperation had a much longer history and was not in itself a distinguishing element of the emergence of big science. The contributors all worked in their own studies (or libraries), and did not cooperate closely. Of course, there were all kinds of relationships. They met at conferences, corresponded with each other, and, of course, even more frequently with the editor-in-chief. Yet they did it all on an individual basis and did not meet as a team. There was neither a local concentration of work, nor staff members who managed the edition. Yet the series was a collective effort by an international group of scholars, funded by extraordinary financial means, and involved a steady flow of publications. In these respects the series is an important step in the establishment of big science, which emerged in full form around 1900.

¹⁴ Harnack, 'Vom Großbetrieb der Wissenschaft' (1905), p. 1014.

¹⁵ The classical book on this subject, Derek J. De Solla Price, *Little Science, Big Science ... and Beyond* (New York: Columbia Press, [1963] 1986), does not take any notice of the humanities.

Like the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1857–1928) the *Sacred Books of the East* were a remarkable model of large-scale production of knowledge.¹⁶ James Murray's task of collecting, assembling and evaluating the myriad of slips of paper with English words, gathered by many thousands of informants, was even more a labour of Sisyphus than Müller's coordinating role, but both men worked incessantly in realizing their *magnum opus* and in establishing some form of procedural objectivity.¹⁷ They wanted to present the evidence as cleanly as possible and overcome partiality.

Textualization of religion

The *Sacred Books of the East* series was thus a landmark in the establishment of the modern scholarly study of religion. In which other respects can Müller's edition be considered to be a landmark? The most obvious relates to its prominent role in the so-called textualization of Eastern religions. Western scholars and oriental officers—often there was no more than a very thin line between the two—went on a hunt for manuscripts and foundational texts of Eastern religions, or what they thought to be religions. The study of Buddhism, for instance, started rather late in the Oriental Renaissance.¹⁸ The Sanskrit manuscripts that Brian Hodgson of the British East Asia Company discovered in the 1820s and 1830s and sent to various learned societies, among these the *Société Asiatique* in Paris, formed the basis for Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* from 1844.¹⁹ Müller himself claimed that his teacher's book 'laid the foundation for a systematic study of the religion of Buddha'.²⁰ Burnouf established India as the birthplace of Buddhism, where it had actually almost disappeared at the time after it had spread through other parts of Asia. Thus, Buddhism was constituted primarily as a textual object existing from the time of Gautama.²¹ Buddhist studies had become 'a history of master texts', a form of orientalism criticized by Edward Said and others for being allegedly 'based on the finality and closure of antiquarian or curatorial knowledge'.²²

Presently, there are many studies on the invention of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, *et cetera*, which demonstrate that these 'religions' and their 'sacred texts' were

¹⁶ K.M. Elisabeth Murray, *Caught in a Web of Words: James Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [1977] 1995).

¹⁷ Kelly Kistner, '“A Word Factory Was Wanted”: Organizational Objectivity in the Making of the *Oxford English Dictionary*', *Social Studies of Science*, 43 (2013), 801–28.

¹⁸ Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984 [French original 1950]).

¹⁹ Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); J.W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America* (Durga Kund, Varanasi: Bharat-Bharati, 1976), original publication in *The Eastern Buddhist*, 7 (1974); Donald S. Lopez, Jr., 'Introduction', in Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 1–29.

²⁰ Müller, 'Buddhism' (1862), in Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1867), I, pp. 182–231, (p. 200).

²¹ Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (Paris, 1844), p. 9. A product of the process of textualization was the emergence of the historical Buddha (Gautama); Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, p. 139.

²² Lopez, 'Introduction', p. 7, the second quotation referring to Edward W. Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', *Cultural Critique*, 1 (1985), 89–107 (106).

produced—as the preferred metaphor runs—in the West.²³ If one would have asked the believers or even the religious specialists, they would have given varying answers as to what their most important religious scriptures were. This is not because of religious ignorance, ‘but because there does not appear to be a wholly accepted body of scripture that is of equal value to the entire community’.²⁴ Thus, Müller’s edition not only contributed to the process of textualization of religion as such, but also played a significant role in highlighting particular texts as representative of particular traditions.

A good example of this process of ‘canonization’ is how the Jain scriptures were selected for the series. An illuminating article by Kendall W. Folkert drew attention to the fact that the corpus of forty-five Jain texts that would define this ‘religion’ for some time was presented as such by one scholar, the orientalist Georg Bühler. Bühler had obtained his information from a *single* informant within the Jain community. This selection of texts only partly matched with other oral and written sources. ‘Yet he put it forward, and lived to see it perpetuated by other scholars’.²⁵ Not everyone, however, committed themselves to this ‘canon’. When Hermann Jacobi was asked to translate Jain texts for the *Sacred Books of the East*, he selected the *Kalpa Sutra*, which did not belong to the corpus that Bühler had put forward. Yet he chose this text because of its enormous popularity and value to the community, which is attested by its ‘overwhelming presence’ in manuscript collections.²⁶ Thus the series contributed to a break with and a renewal of a presumed Jain canon.

In this way a view of religion with a strong emphasis on scriptural canonicity was superimposed by orientalists onto a religious community, in which texts had hitherto mainly a ritual function and no independent authority in themselves. In this sense the edition of Müller’s *Sacred Books* indeed ratified the idea that religious texts of oriental religions functioned as scriptures in ways analogous to the Hebrew and Christian Bible. No doubt, the Protestant idea of the normative character of scripture also played an important role in taking this approach. As this led to a distorted understanding of various traditions, however, it is important to explore how these ‘books’ were and are actually used.

The notion that there are sacred books and scriptures is by no means an innocuous one when applied to religious traditions.²⁷ The textualization of foreign religions may be symptomatic of cultural imperialism, by which scholarly Western authority is imposed on Eastern cultures. Imperial and cultural power are intertwined here. Without colonial expansion, such ancient texts would never have been ‘discovered’ and subsequently translated. The monumental series itself exhibited oriental culture, but in a way that was produced by supreme western scholarship. Textualization is not just an unintended

²³ P.J. Marshall, ed., *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²⁴ Kendall W. Folkert, ‘The “Canons” of “Scripture”’, in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Miriam Levering (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 170–79 (p. 175).

²⁵ Folkert, ‘The “Canons” of “Scripture”’, p. 175.

²⁶ Folkert, ‘The “Canons” of “Scripture”’, p. 175.

²⁷ Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Because of the inadequacy of the term ‘religion’, Fitzgerald even makes a plea for its abolishment. The best one can say about such a proposal is that it comes too late, as the term has in the process of imperialism and globalism been spread over the world and has become even ingrained in foundational, constitutional documents of non-Western states.

consequence of the inclusion of foreign cultures in the comparative studies of cultural phenomena. Max Müller and others were even explicit in this respect. In his 'Sketch of Buddhism' (1828), Brian Hodgson explained how he procured in Nepal 'large works relating to Buddhism' from an old man, the *Pâtna Bauddha*, whom he presented with 'a set of questions, which I desired he would answer from his books'.²⁸ His information was to be corroborated by the texts that he had acquired for Hodgson. In this procedure texts that actually played a subordinate role in practical life were given authority over the religious specialist, whose authority is redirected and redefined by the textual evidence.

In the same vein, Müller claimed that—notwithstanding its shortcomings—the translations of the *Sacred Books of the East* were to be accepted for the present as a sufficient authority. On one occasion Müller invited the 'learned natives' to give their opinion about their own traditions, on the condition, however, that they should always support their statements by reference to their own sacred texts. In this way they could 'hold their own against the best oriental scholars of Europe, nay, even correct their views by their own more intimate acquaintance with their sacred texts, and their more living knowledge of the present working of their religion'.²⁹ The tacit implication, of course, was that it could also be the other way around. Seemingly authority is handed back to the 'natives', whereas structurally it is in the hands of Western scholars, who literally produced and constructed these texts as the only sources of authority.

The comparative way (of doing the science of religion)

The edition of the *Sacred Books of the East* implied notions of classification, comparison and development. Even where this exact terminology was not used—as in the case of Max Müller—a certain way of doing 'comparative religion' (an utterly misleading term, as Müller already noted)³⁰ is implied. The early practitioners of the science of religion wanted to outline development as well as progress in the history of religions. Classifications and classificatory schemes were used in the cultural sciences in general to map the vast territories of research—mostly in an evolutionist vein.

Methodologically, the idea of comparison lies at the root of the series of the *Sacred Books of the East*. In Müller's view the study of the East has provided 'us with parallels,

²⁸ Brian Houghton Hodgson, 'Sketch of Buddhism, Derived from the Bauddha Scriptures of Nepal' (1828), in Hodgson, *Essays on the Languages, Literature and Religion of Nepal and Tibet* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1972 [reprint of London 1874]), pp. 35–65 (pp. 35–36). These 'questions and answers form the text of this paper. Having in his answers quoted sundry *slokas* in proof of his statements; and many of the scriptures whence these were taken being now in my possession, I was tempted to try the truth of his quotations. Of that, my research gave me in general satisfactory proof. But the possession of the books led to questions respecting their relative age and authority; and, tried by this test, the *Bauddha's* quotations were not always so satisfactory. Thus one step led to another, until I conceived the idea of drawing up, with the aid of my old friend and his books, a sketch of the terminology and general disposition of the external parts of Buddhism, in the belief that such a sketch, though but imperfectly executed, would be of some assistance to such of my countrymen as, with the books only before them, might be disposed to enter into a full and accurate investigation of this almost unknown subject'.

²⁹ Max Müller, 'The Principles of the Science of Religion, or Comparative Theology', in *Universal Religion: A Course of Lessons, Historical and Scientific, on the Various Faiths of the World*, ed. by Edmund Buckley (Chicago: The University Association, s.d. [1897]), pp. 17–29 (p. 29).

³⁰ Max Müller, 'The Principles of the Science of Religion', p. 21, note: 'No one would use comparative bones in the sense of comparative anatomy'.

and with all that is implied in parallels, viz. the possibility of comparing'.³¹ The most promising way to argue that the edition of the *Sacred Books of the East* 'publicly defines and authoritatively establishes the new comparative science of religion at the end of the [nineteenth] century',³² is that it provides the 'parallels' for comparison. Of course, the series also set the parameters for a textual approach to religion, but this aspect is not quintessential for the rise of the comparative study of religion. Thus it may be argued that the series inscribed a new comparative way of doing the study of religion, by putting these texts together in fifty volumes.

This line of argumentation finds support in the writings of Max Müller himself. Knowledge that deserves this name began in his view with comparison. Single events thus could not really be understood. Therefore, the sacred books 'had to be placed side by side with perfect impartiality, in order to discern the points which they share in common as well as those that are peculiar to each'.³³ Nevertheless, Müller talked in terms of *applying* the comparative method to the study of religions and their writings in particular. In this sense he would not have claimed that the series as such defined the new approach.

It is not my intention here to say that Müller himself has the last word in this matter, but it is difficult to gather independent evidence that the series really did define or even ratify a whole taxonomy of concepts and methods in the emerging science of religion. That is why it might rather be suggested that the edition *inscribed* a new approach, which is developed and explained elsewhere by Müller. It is not a manifesto that publicly announces new methods and concepts, but somehow (one could argue) the series incorporates these. Most translators were learned specialists of specific oriental cultures, languages and religions, and did not themselves—with perhaps the exception of Rhys Davids and James Legge—contribute much to the comparative study of various religions.³⁴ But Müller himself, of course, had this in mind in conceiving the series and made major contributions to the new field.

The series not only envisioned a method, but also specific results, a theology of religions, as we would call it nowadays. The series presented—Max Müller claimed in his lecture to the Oriental Congress of 1874—hard evidence that 'all religions spring from the same sacred soil, the human heart', that the infinite is the very condition of the finite, and that man 'yearns for something the world cannot give'.³⁵ Some contributors had intellectual, emotional, and religious affinities with the religions they studied and wanted—although they remained truthful to their own Christian religion—to transcend the boundaries of old-time orthodoxy. The majority of them were on the fringes of established Christianity.

Power, texts and language—translations for whom?

The edition was somewhat of a mixed bag. The *Sacred Books of the East* were scholarly translations that aimed to do justice to the original texts, which were presented in their

³¹ F. Max Müller, 'Address [to the Aryan Section]', in *Transactions of the Second Session of the International Congress of Orientalists*, London, September 1874 (London, 1876 [Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1968]), pp. 177–204, (p. 184). The text is reprinted in *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 4 (first series), pp. 317–58.

³² Norman Girardot, 'Max Müller's *Sacred Books*', pp. 219–20.

³³ Müller, 'Address [to the Aryan Section]', p. 185.

³⁴ The argument here is that the other translators did no major work in the field of the comparative study of religion.

³⁵ Müller, 'Address [to the Aryan Section]', p. 185.

entirety. But to which readers in particular was the series addressed? On the one hand, it suggested that it aimed at educated readers in general. But were they really expected to buy and read all the fifty volumes? Nothing could be found in the archives regarding subscriptions to the whole series, and even libraries often ordered only specific volumes. Given the fact that the first editions of the volumes comprised 1,500 copies, there must have been substantial interest among the educated elite. On the other hand, the series was aimed at scholars of religion, who finally had reliable texts on which they could base their comparisons. There does not appear to be much evidence, however, to support the idea that the translations were actually used in many cases for this purpose. The reception of the volumes seems to have mainly taken place within specific disciplines and less in 'comparative religion'.

No doubt, the series can be seen as a *monument* in the history of the comparative study of religion, because it represented the powerful expression of the wish to gather the main religions of the world under one umbrella in one prestigious and costly edition. The set was presented to the leaders of the world, not only to Queen Victoria, but also to the Sultan of Turkey and the Pope in Rome.³⁶ In this respect it was an imperial edition, which established authority by representing authoritative sacred books and presenting these to authorities with religious and worldly power. The achievement of editing and completing fifty volumes—including a powerful index, which rubricized and categorized the other forty-nine volumes—gives the edition a monumental character. This fact—which is further strengthened by the reprints and the inclusion in the 1960s in the Unesco Collection of Representative Works—contributes much to its prestige. Like physical monuments celebrating or commemorating big events in the history of the nation, it still reminds us of Müller's power to assemble his international team of scholars to present the *Sacred Books of the East* to mankind (to phrase it in a Müllerian way). It was financed by British institutions and the texts were—as a matter of course—translated into English. This is by no means a minor achievement.

The following anecdote that is told by Müller's widow is telling in this respect. A friend of Müller remembered his meeting with 'distinguished Indians', having tea at Balliol. One of them said:

[Müller] has done more than any living man to spread the knowledge of English in India. It is difficult for English people to realize the variety of languages in India, and how little one part of India knows the language of the other part. But we all want to be able to read our Sacred Books. We now widely study English, in order to read our Sacred Books; though there have been imitators since, the praise must belong first to Max Müller, who invented and worked out the idea of translating our Sacred Books into English.³⁷

This story is, of course, a typical example of how Georgina framed her husband's tremendous importance. Taken at face value the statement is doubtless an exaggeration, but the fact that these texts, or at least some of them, came to India in English translation testifies to the close relationship between scholarship and Empire. In this way the knowledge of their own religious past was mediated to educated Indians in a language that is foreign

³⁶ Müller, LLA II, pp. 196, 316, 373, 378. LLA and LLB refer, respectively, to the American and British edition of *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Max Müller*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1902).

³⁷ Müller, LLB II, p. 364.

to them and loaded with (symbolic) power.³⁸ This type of Indian ‘reception’ was a token of imperial power, in the sense that the metropolis dominated its colony not only by its military and administration, but also by education and language, which were deemed necessary for the self-understanding of the colonized. The irony here is that this point of view was not presented as being imposed on the ‘distinguished Indians’, but accepted by them in their praise for Müller’s work. The interiorization of English education and knowledge by the Indian elite was, of course, deeply entangled in hard economic and political forms of colonial power.

The quotation above even suggests that the English language may transcend the variety of languages in India, and thus help to unify the colony. There exists, as Benedict Anderson has shown, not only a close connection between print capitalism and nationalism, but also between scripture and nation.³⁹ Through his edition of the *Rg Veda* Müller had contributed to the identity of the colonized Indian nation. Peter van der Veer has pointed to the fact that the orality of Hindu traditions ‘was a “national” embarrassment for Indian scholars who were confronted with the comparison with the West’.⁴⁰ It is one thing to textualize oral Hindu traditions in their original language, another to present translations of these sacred texts in the language of the colonial power. The English translations became in the course of history more easily accessible for many Indians than the Sanskrit originals. Through both the edition of the *Rg Veda* and that of the *Sacred Books* the status of India as a civilised country was re-enforced, as writing was and is seen as proof of civilisation. ‘Book religions’ certainly ranked higher than religions without scriptures. Being able to write and read is one of the key markers of civilizational progress. The idea that illiterate people have to be educated, also for their own sake, is deeply engraved in Western modernity.

Conclusion

Did the *Sacred Books of the East* define a new discursivity and did the series change the game of the comparative study of religion and culture? Strictly speaking, these claims cannot be upheld. It is better to see the edition as a crucial marker of these developments than to claim that in itself the series wrought these transformations. This being said, it must be acknowledged that this costly and prestigious edition of fifty volumes carried some weight—literally and symbolically. More than other classical texts—introductions, handbooks, and encyclopaedias—it was a monument of the comparative study of the religious Orient. This monumental character gives the series its distinction and gives rise to the claim that it defined a new method in religious studies.

From a more distant perspective we must say that the series textualized and religionized (if this word is permitted) the East. In this sense the term ‘sacred books’ is revealing. The subtext was that these cultures can and must be compared. This construction of the sacred texts was characterized by a streak of imperial power. In a deeper sense the series

³⁸ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 93.

³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (revised edition, London: Verso, 1991 [original edition 1983]).

⁴⁰ Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 120.

not only incorporated a certain way of looking at things, but made them appear in the first place, because the oriental cultures were framed according to Western schemes of understanding and interpretation. Müller and his co-workers needed texts, which were to be 'discovered' and brought under the power of Western scholarship. In this way the oral character of religion as practised was 'translated'—and thus often deformed—into a textual mode by scholars, who looked for 'origins' as documented by manuscripts. This does not mean, of course, that the 'sacred books' were pure Western constructions without any basis in ancient Eastern traditions. Müller and his co-workers looked for texts and manuscripts in the East which they could use for their series. Some 'sacred books'—for instance the Chinese texts—already had an established status before they were translated. The language of 'construction' and even 'invention' refers predominantly to the unequal power relations between the translators and their Eastern informants.

In many cases the 'educated orientals' were estranged from their own practices and presented with a presumably more original and thus authoritative version of their religion. Apparently Müller accepted them as intellectual partners, but the authority of pundits and other religious officials was transferred to the texts. Only if they could back up their insights by textual reference was their voice to be heard. This type of orientalism was no one-way street, but the conditions of the conversation were determined by the discursivity of a textualized understanding of religion. Despite all goodwill which scholars such as Müller certainly had towards the people and cultures of the East, imperial power and the concomitant discourse enforced their understanding upon these cultures.

Notes on contributor

Arie L. Molendijk is Professor of the History of Christianity and Philosophy at the University of Groningen. He has published extensively in the history of ideas, in particular on nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology, religious studies and philosophy. Among his writings are a German language book on the theologian and sociologist Ernst Troeltsch and a monograph on *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands* (Brill, 2005). His latest book is *Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Website: <http://ariemolendijk.nl>

Correspondence to: Arie L. Molendijk. Email: a.l.molendijk@rug.nl